

# The Archival Profession and Society

Gregory S. Hunter

The archival profession plays a key role in society. We know this in our hearts and experience it in our professional lives. Our mission—to identify, preserve, and make available records and papers of enduring value—makes the past accessible to present and future generations. This mission transforms what we do from just a job to a profession. The archival mission unites us despite the various settings in which we practice our profession.

While archivists and society are intertwined, seldom does an entire issue of a professional journal reflect this fact. Though I have to admit that I did not plan it this way, the articles in the current issue discuss many aspects of this relationship. I hope they provide food for thought and nourish you in your continuing commitment to the archival mission.

Bruce Montgomery begins the issue with a discussion of records and warfare. In “Reconciling the Inalienability Doctrine with the Conventions of War,” Montgomery traces the history of records captured during wartime and the professional implications of a doctrine requiring records to be returned to their creators even if those creators are repressive regimes. He argues for refinements of the inalienability doctrine to reflect current world realities.

Timothy G. Nutt and Diane F. Worrell discuss institutional resources available for the archival enterprise and our professional obligation to use those resources wisely. In “Planning for Archival Repositories: A Common-Sense Approach,” Nutt and Worrell present a case study of one repository’s experience with planning. Going beyond traditional planning models and strategies, they developed a hybrid approach to align priorities and assign resources in a way that fosters excellence and efficiency.

In “Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative,” Mario H. Ramirez continues the discussion of social justice begun two years ago by Mark A. Greene.<sup>1</sup> This article was discussed at a prepublication “brown bag lunch” at the recent SAA annual meeting in Cleveland. Ramirez uses Greene’s work as the impetus for a broader look at the predominance of

whiteness in the archival profession and a professional landscape free of difference and contestation. In particular, the third section of the article presents challenges to us as individual archivists and as a profession.

Archives also play an important role in countries other than the United States. Zhiying Lian discusses the use of social media by Chinese archives. In "Archives Microblogs and Archival Culture in China," Lian argues that the prevailing organizational culture has blocked the adoption and development of microblogging in Chinese archives.

Alex H. Poole looks at the relationship between archivists and historians in his article, "Archival Divides and Foreign Countries? Historians, Archivists, Information-Seeking, and Technology: Retrospect and Prospect." Poole reviews the past, present, and future of these allied professions. He emphasizes that the archivist-historian relationship remains pivotal in facilitating historical research and in defining the identity of both archivists and historians.

Other professions and industries are innovating to meet the challenges of the present and opportunities of the future. Mary O. Murphy, Laura Peimer, Genna Duplisea, and Jaimie Fritz bring this concept into the archival arena in their article, "Failure Is an Option: The Experimental Archives Project Puts Archival Innovation to the Test." They discuss a "sandbox" for archival processing experimentation. The Experimental Archives Project considers and tests ideas from outside the archival world as it looks to answer a primary question: if technology could allow archivists to speed up processing and do anything with archival materials, what would our users want us to do?

Society relies on archivists to achieve the proper balance between the right to know and the right to privacy. The professional and ethical challenges can be particularly difficult with records that are sensitive by their very nature. Laura Farley and Eric Willey discuss this challenge in their article, "Wisconsin School for Girls Inmate Record Books: A Case Study of Redacted Digitization." They argue that redacted digital representations of a limited number of the institution's records combined with an online user agreement form can enable archives to open sensitive collections to researchers while still preserving public trust in archival custodianship.

Preservation is another area where society places trust in archives and archivists. Jessica Phillips contributes to the ongoing discussion of More Product, Less Process with her article, "A Defense of Preservation in the Age of MPLP." She discusses the importance of preservation within archives, explores the relationship between access and preservation, and suggests strategies for efficient preservation.

Archivists ultimately preserve materials so they can be made available to researchers. Felicia Williamson, Scott Vieira, and James Williamson look at a traditional tool, the finding aid, in light of new ways to reach the public. In

“Marketing Finding Aids on Social Media: What Worked and What Didn’t Work,” the authors tested whether social media could be an effective tool to promote finding aids and entice new audiences to archives.

Education also is a key concern for society. This issue contains a special section on “Archives and Education.” The first article, by Matthew R. Francis, focuses on the education of future archivists. “2013 Archival Program Graduates and the Entry-Level Job Market” presents a complicated picture for the archives profession, including a placement rate of 71.7 percent, a high reliance on part-time and temporary positions, and a perceived lack of appropriate compensation for professional positions.

The second article in this special section explores how archives can support the current emphasis on education for careers in science, technology, engineering, and math. Lindsay Anderberg’s article, “STEM Undergraduates and Archival Instruction: A Case Study at NYU Polytechnic School of Engineering,” demonstrates the benefits of integrating archival research into the undergraduate STEM curriculum. Anderberg concludes that successful archival outreach to and instruction of STEM undergraduates can be achieved through proper planning and faculty support.

The education theme continues in the reviews section of this issue. Heather Briston presents a review essay on “Instruction and Archives.” She summarizes and evaluates four recent books on education and the art of teaching. The review essay is followed by individual reviews of six books on archival theory and practice.

I am proud to be an archivist and a member of a profession that takes so seriously its legal and ethical responsibilities to society. I hope this issue of *The American Archivist* will further the discussion of the archival mission among individual archivists and the profession as a whole.



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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Mark Greene, “A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We’re Doing That’s All That Important?,” *The American Archivist* 76 (Fall/Winter 2013): 302–34.